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SUBJECT: HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN TAJIKISTAN'S COTTON SECTOR

¶11. (U) Summary: During a recent visit to Sughd region emboff and visiting G/TIP Officer explored trafficking issues and assessed allegations that students were forced by government authorities to pick cotton, despite a presidential decree prohibiting the practice. Emboff and G/TIP Officer found evidence of forced and child labor in the cotton industry that contradicted the government's position. End summary.

¶12. (U) The cotton harvest in Tajikistan began about September 15, and it will last approximately 70 days. Emboff and G/TIP Officer Megan Hall visited Sughd, a major cotton producing region, September 25-26.

¶13. (U) During the Soviet period, the government viewed cotton as a strategic economic interest of the state. Students and government workers throughout the country participated in the cotton harvest, and many considered participation a patriotic duty. Students viewed this time as a way to bond with classmates, in addition to performing their civic duty. This tradition continues in Tajikistan, but the circumstances have changed significantly.

¶14. (U) The Tajik government has set a fixed price to purchase cotton from farmers, which it then sells on the international market. This fixed price is well below market value, making it difficult for farmers to pay workers to pick cotton. Accordingly, farmers turn to local officials to mobilize labor, which inevitably leads to local officials compelling people to participate in the cotton campaign at untenably low wages or often no wage at all.

UNIVERSITY STUDENTS - FORCED LABOR

¶15. (U) In Sughd, Students in the first through third years of university - ages 18 to 21 - have been forced to pick cotton for this year's harvest. David Holzmeyer, an Amcit English Teaching Fellow at Khujand State University, described to emboff how on September 17 a university administrator told him to announce to his students that the next day they would be taken out to the fields to pick cotton. University administrators and professors oversaw the organization and transportation of students, and professors accompanied the students to oversee the cotton picking. The students were not given a choice about participating; classes for first through third year students were cancelled. Several students tried to "buy their way out" - either by bribing a university official or a medical board examiner.

¶16. (SBU) Emboff spoke to three of Holzmeyer's students (all in their third year) who had participated in prior years. The students said they wanted to stay in school and concentrate on their studies. Two of the students bribed officials to avoid participating this year; the third simply refused to go with her classmates. She said she was concerned that the dean of the university would see her in town during the harvest and would confront her; she was afraid she could be expelled for refusing to pick cotton.

¶17. According to the students, while working in the fields, they lived in run down shacks. Conditions were generally deplorable, but varied by farm and supervisor: working hours were 6 a.m. to 7 p.m.; the drinking water was dirty; students were punished if they did not meet quotas; some had to pay to take a shower. Students had to pay for their food, and wages were extremely low; they essentially broke even by the time the campaign was over. Visits home were limited to

once a week, and students usually asked family members to bring them changes of clothes or extra food.
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¶18. (SBU) University officials forced many students to sign "applications" so that they could later claim that the students were voluntarily picking cotton. Those who avoided going to the fields were required to perform janitorial services at the university for the duration. Those who avoided service altogether were punished - either with expulsion or with poor grades. University officials notified military officials of male students who had been expelled, so that the military could conscript them immediately.

¶19. (SBU) Holzmeyer and his students said that this set of circumstances applied to most first to third year university students in Khujand's universities.

SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS - CHILD LABOR

¶10. (SBU) Holzmeyer's students said that secondary school students in grades 8 to 11 (ages 14 to 17) also participated in the harvest. Teachers gathered the students after classes and took them to work in the fields for several hours during the day. The students then returned home by bus. It was unclear whether they were compelled in the same manner as university students, and unknown whether there was punishment for refusal to participate. This practice appeared to be more prevalent in rural communities, rather than in the region's cities.

¶11. (SBU) While traveling in the area, EmbOffs came upon a group of secondary school students picking cotton near Konibodom. A teacher from the school had driven the students to the field in a bus; he and a local farmer were relaxing in the bus while about 20 students were hard at work in the hot afternoon sun. The teacher said that the students were in grades 8-11, and that they were being supervised by other teachers. The farmer said that he had asked local officials to send out some laborers to help him with his crops; he said he paid the students for their work.

GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES - UNKNOWN

¶12. (SBU) Our contacts informed us that employees of some government institutions were compelled to pick cotton. These employees continued to draw their official salaries, but went to the cotton fields instead of to work as usual. Military conscripts also harvested cotton. We did not have a chance to corroborate these allegations.

SEEING IS BELIEVING

¶13. (SBU) Comment: The official government line on this issue is that no one picks cotton campaign against their will, and that government officials are not involved in labor violations. President Rahmon and the Minister of Education have issued a decree to this effect. Our observations, as well as numerous published reports, contradict the government's statements. Government officials force university students to pick cotton under conditions that satisfy the definition of trafficking in persons for labor exploitation. At the very least, local officials are complicit in illegal child labor; further investigation is warranted, however, there is strong evidence that the authorities are complicit in forced labor trafficking of both children and adults. While we have not had the chance to explore these issues in the south of the country, it is likely - based in part on publicly available reports - that the same situation exists in Khatlon Province.

¶14. (SBU) Comment continued: We will be reporting our findings to the authorities, including the Chairman of the Inter-Ministerial Commission to Fight Trafficking in Persons. A Tajik labor official recently admitted to us that the government has not seriously investigated claims of human rights violations in the cotton industry by, for example, carrying out labor inspections. Government attempts to deny involvement in labor violations and trafficking are superficial; there are significant problems that the government must address. End comment.